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AUTHOR Chen, Chuansheng
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the cross-cultural differences involved in Chinese and American students' attitudes towards education. Examined were students' daily experiences, wishes, aspirations, likes, and dislikes. Data were obtained through interviews with 396 Chinese and 720 American students from the 1st, 3rd, and 5th grades. Students attended 11 schools in Beijing and 20 schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. On the average, children of all grades in both cities said they liked school, math, and reading, and had high self-evaluations. Chinese children in all grades liked school in general more than their American counterparts did. American children were more positive than Chinese children about all abilities except for getting along with others. Chinese children reported being engaged in academic activities, clubs, art lessons, and chores after school more often than American children. A total of 81% to 90% of Chinese children thought about things related to schoolwork on their way to school; in comparison, 46% to 73% of American children did so. When asked about their wishes, more Chinese children mentioned education-related wishes than did American children. References, tables, and graphs are included. (RJC)

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A Study of Chinese and American Children's Attitudes Towards Schooling[1]

Chuansheng Chen

University of Michigan

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Consistent differences in academic achievement have been reported among children from different cultures. For example, Asian students have been found to display higher performance in mathematics than their counterparts in the United States (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Garden, 1987; Husen, 1967; Stevenson et al., 1986). Within the United States, white children have been found to perform better than children from minority groups, such as black, Hispanic, and American Indian children, with the exception of Asian Americans (Coleman et al., 1966; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, in review). Researchers have attempted to explain these systematic differences on the basis of differences in children's family background, educational settings, time in school, curriculum structure, and children's intelligence. Recently, the role of cultural values or beliefs has been recognized. Cultural values are more fundamental than educational settings. For example, a cultural belief in hard work or practice may lead to a large amount of instruction and homework. Chen and Uttal (1988) indicated that three of these values are of special importance to children's academic performance. They are (a) attitudes toward education, (b) a belief in human malleability, and (c) a belief in achievement as a collective endeavor. The present paper examines the first belief using data from a large-scale cross-cultural study. Unlike previous studies, which focused on parents' beliefs, this paper focuses exclusively on children's own beliefs and behaviors.

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It has been noted that education has special importance in the daily life of both ancient and contemporary Chinese people (e.g., Chen & Uttal, 1988; Hess et al., 1987; Kessen, 1975; Munro, 1977; Smith, 1931). Chinese people believe in the value of education for the nation's well-being as well as for personal advancement. Some research confirms this observation. For example, Stevenson et al. (1986) and Chen and Uttal (1988) reported that Chinese mothers, compared to American mothers, of elementary school children put more value on education, have higher expectations for their child, and are less satisfied with their child's school performance.

As a ladder for upward mobility, education has played an important role in the life of Chinese people ever since the time of Confucius. Up until early twentieth century, selection of civil officials had been entirely dependent on examinations of the applicants' knowledge of Chinese classics[2]. In China, a good education has meant a good living. This is less likely the case in America, where the transition from school to work is not as smooth. This reality brings about fundamental differences between these two cultures: Chinese emphasizes educational accomplishment, while American emphasizes occupational achievement. Williams (1969) put it this way, "American culture is marked by a central stress upon personal achievement, especially secular occupational achievement." (p. 13) He continued, "The comparatively striking feature of American culture is its tendency to identify standards of personal excellence with competitive occupational achievement."

As pieces of evidence from different sources show, the cultural value of education seems to be well-inculcated into Chinese children's minds. First, Chinese children are doing extremely well in school compared to children from other countries, especially the United States (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Garden, 1987; Stevenson et al., 1986). Second, they have positive attitudes about school,

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2. Until very recently, the guaranteed job and salary for college graduates has made higher education more attractive. But as the economic reform proceeds, this guarantee will be gone to join the "Iron Rice Bowl". Right now, education is a hot topic in China. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that in the last ten years the biggest mistake was made in the policy of education. A new trend of devaluing education is emerging in China. It is suspected that people's attitudes toward education today would be different from those in 1986. This is an especially interesting time to study the political influence on people's attitudes toward education. However, cultural values are deeply rooted. Temporary political and/or economical change can only affect them for a limited period of time. These influences will not last. For example, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese educational system was basically paralyzed. When the turmoil was finally over, the educational system was re-established at an astonishing speed.

subject matters, and homework (Chen & Stevenson, in press). Third, Chinese children have been reported to value education and knowledge in their daily life. In 1932, Webster asked Chinese students their first and second choices of things they wanted most. More than one-third of about 4500 students chose things like knowledge, fame, virtue, and long life. About another 30% chose books and stationery. Only about 2% were interested in money. About 20% gave no answer. The rest mentioned toys, clothing, home, and the like. When asked about the best thing they ever knew a boy or girl could do, The two major answers were: Study and serve others.

The inculcation of the value of education into children is also obvious from the analyses of textbooks used in China. Ridley et al. (1971) did thematic analyses of elementary school textbooks and found that under behavioral themes, achievement (e.g., diligence, persistence, desire to achieve, achievement cleverness, etc.) and social and personal responsibility (e.g., devotion to duty, obedience, honesty, etc.) were the most important, followed by altruistic behavior, collective behavior, prosocial aggression (e.g., attack enemy or criminals).

It should be pointed out that although education is theoretically defined as developing a child into a moral, intellectual, and physically fit person in the Chinese society (Thomas & Postlethwaite, 1983), the actual emphasis has been on the academic performance. Thus, the importance of education is narrowly perceived as the importance of school achievement on subject matters, especially mathematics, and also science for later grades (Xu, 1985). To some extent, Chinese society emphasizes the educational attainment instead of wholistic development of a child. This might seem practical in the view that education is still the most important channel for upward mobility.

As it stands, American society is in strong contrast with Chinese society. Unlike Chinese mothers, American mothers pay more attention to the development of cognitive abilities of their child. Children themselves also pay a lot attention to school aspects other than academic subjects. There is evidence that academic concern does not occupy a central place in the mind of American high school students (e.g., Coleman, 1960). Coleman (1960) found that athletics

appeared to be more influential than scholarship. Adolescent students would like to be remembered as athletic stars rather than as brilliant scholars. And students are leaders because they are good at athletics not because of good grades.

Based on extensive interviews with elementary school children in China and the US, this study examined children's attitudes toward education, including their daily experiences, wishes, aspirations, likes, and dislikes. The focus of the paper will be on cross-cultural differences in children's attitudes toward academic subjects versus non-academic aspects of schooling, and those toward education versus activities not related to education. In addition, developmental differences will also be discussed.

Methods

Subjects. Representative samples of 396 Chinese and 720 American children were selected from 11 schools in Beijing and 20 schools in the Chicago metropolitan area to serve as subjects. Equal numbers of children were chosen from first, third, and fifth grades. About half of the subjects were boys for each grade in each city.

Instruments. As a part of a larger study, children were interviewed individually by trained interviewers. Children were asked how much they liked school, math, and reading and how well they thought they did in math, reading, sports, and getting along with others compared to other students. Interviewers presented and explained to the children a 5-point scale (1 = "does not like at all" or "one of the worst", 3 = "does not care" or "about in the middle", 5 = "likes very much" or "one of the best") for each item. The open-ended questions that will be discussed here include the following:

1. "Other than doing homework, what else do you do after school?"

2. "Let's say there is a wizard who will let you make a wish about anything that you want. What would you wish?"

3. "What do you think you will do after you finish eighth grade?"

4. "What are some things you think about when you are on your way to school every day?"

5. (When children indicated a change of attitudes toward school) "Why did you change from liking it this much to this much (point to the scale)?"

Coding. The open-ended questions were coded according to a coding scheme which was developed through analyses of a sample of responses. Two native speakers coded the responses independently. When disagreement occurred between the two coders, a group meeting involving researchers from both cultural backgrounds was held to make a group decision. All results presented here are based on first response children gave, unless otherwise noted[3].

Results and discussion

Attitudes Toward School, Math, and Reading

On average, children of all grades in both cities said they liked school, math, and reading (means = 3.9 to 4.8 on a 5-point scale, according to grade, country, and item) (see Figure 1). Chinese children at all grades liked school in general more than did their American counterparts, F's (1, 347-364) = 12.82-21.62, p's < .001. Chinese first and third graders also liked math more than did American children, F's (1, 361 and 364) = 4.27 and 14.16, p's < .05. There was no cross-cultural difference in children's attitudes toward reading.

A developmental decline was found in Chinese children's attitudes toward school, math, and reading, and in America children's attitudes toward school and reading, F's (2, 385-687) = 9.33 –

3. Because of the representativeness of the sample and the low rate of second responses, various methods of presenting data such as presenting percentage of responses, percentage of subjects by combining the multiple responses, and percentage of subjects by first response, gave similar results. Among these methods, however, percentage of subjects by first responses gave the clearest picture because the percentages add up to 100 and no weighting is necessary for the children who gave multiple responses.

19.94, p's < .001. Fifth graders had less positive attitudes than first graders, and third graders were somewhere in between.

To investigate these developmental differences further, children were asked how much they liked school when they first started school and then were asked about their current liking of school. If they gave different answers to the two questions, they were asked for reasons why they changed their attitudes toward school. These three questions revealed interesting cross-cultural differences. Chinese children tended to have more stable and consistent attitudes toward school than did American children. Sixty six percent of the Chinese children chose the same scale value, while only 33% of the American children did so. One third of the American children thought they liked school better than they had, and another third thought that was not the case. This seems to conflict with the developmental decline reported above. However, this could be due to children's selective memory or due to the difference between longitudinal and cross-sectional findings. Among the third of Chinese children who thought their attitudes had changed over time, about twice as many (23%) thought they liked school less as those who thought they liked school better (12%). This is consistent with the developmental decline found in cross-sectional comparisons.

Children gave various reasons for the change of their attitudes. A majority of those who perceived a negative change gave the reason of the increase in difficulty of the schoolwork (61% in Beijing and 74% in Chicago). For those who had a positive change, understanding the value of education accounted for 43% of Chinese, but only 1 child (.5%) said so in America. In America, the major reasons for an increase in positive attitudes about school were factors related to teachers and/or peers (25%), followed by interest of school life (20%), getting used to school routine (18%), change in the difficulty of schoolwork (14%), and change of child's ability (15%). For Chinese children, the factors related to teachers and peers and a change in child's ability also played a role in increasing positive attitudes about school (17%). Therefore, the results suggest that (a) increases in task difficulty leads to negative attitudes; (b) Chinese children give more

emphasis to the value of education; (c) social/teacher factors tend to improve children's attitudes; and (d) children's self-concepts of ability also play a role in improving their attitudes.

Self-concept of Abilities

As Figure 2 shows, children at all grades from both countries had high self-evaluations. On average, they thought they were better than average, as denoted by a 3 on the scale. In terms of cross-cultural differences, American children were more positive about their abilities than were Chinese children, especially at first grade, F's (1,363-364) = 12.64-14.02, p's < .001, except for getting along with others. American third-graders were more positive than were Chinese third-graders about their math abilities, F (1,361) = 12.88 p < .001. At fifth grade, American children had higher self-evaluations than did Chinese children about their reading abilities, F (1,348) = 7.98, p < .01. A developmental decline was found for all self-evaluations in Chinese children and all but getting along with others in American children, F's (2,386-687) = 4.71-21.67, p's < .01.

The general tendency of the inflation of children's self-concepts could reflect the interference of children's desires with self-evaluation. They confuse what they would like be with what they are. Another plausible factor is the amount of appropriate feedback children get from teachers and parents. The fact that younger children have a more positive picture might be because they get less realistic feedback. The same factor might also account for some of the cross-cultural differences. A third factor affecting the cross-cultural differences may be the common Chinese characteristic of modesty about self.

Education in Children's Life

In order to understand children's perceptions of the importance of education, we need to find out where and when children would think of education or schoolwork. Four questions were asked concerning children's engagement in education: (a) what they did after school; (b) what they thought about on their way to school; (c) what they wanted most in their life; and (d) what kind of education they wanted.

It has been reported that Chinese children spent more time on homework than did American children (Chen & Stevenson, in press). When children were asked what else they did after school besides homework, an unexpected finding was that Chinese children were still engaged in academic activities, such as, doing extra homework assigned by parents, reviewing lessons, preparing for the next day's class, checking homework with parents, attending special classes, receiving tutoring, and going to the library to read, more than were American children (36% versus 10%) (see Figure 3). Slightly more Chinese children also reported attending clubs and art lessons such as painting, practicing calligraphy, and playing musical instruments (9% versus 5%). More Chinese children than American children said they did chores after school (12% versus 5%). In contrast, more American children watched TV (25% versus 12%) and played (47% versus 25%).

Another question also reveals the Chinese children's engagement with education. When children were asked what they thought about on their way to school, from 81% to 90% of Chinese children (depending on grade level) said they thought about things related to schoolwork, such as tests and exams, being on time for school, math classes, being prepared for class and teachers' questions, and the like, compared to only 46% to 73% of American children mentioned them (see Table 1). American children tended to think more about things not related to schoolwork, such as socializing with friends, special activities like movies and games, treats and prizes, food, snacks and lunch. With the increase of grade level, American children became more concerned about schoolwork.

Education as a central task in the minds of Chinese children is also obvious in Table 2. Children were asked about their wishes. Many more Chinese children mentioned education-related wishes, such as books, stationery, grades, future educational aspirations, and knowledge. In contrast, American children were fond of money, material things like toys and pets, and fantasies. American children's interest in money and fantasies increases with age, while interest in material things decreases with age.

Children's interest in education is also revealed in their educational aspirations. When children were asked what they would do after junior high, the majority of Chinese children (87%, 91%, and 92%, for first, third and fifth grade respectively) said they would go on to high school, teachers' college, and university. The percentages were smaller for American children (42%, 69%, and 86%). One out of five American first graders did not know what they would do after junior high. Another third of them gave various answers, such as "Go and play!".

Conclusions

In general, both Chinese and American children had very positive attitudes about school and school subjects. They also had positive self-evaluations of their academic performance. However, these attitudes and self-evaluations declined with grade level. The increase in the difficulty of schoolwork may be partially responsible for this decline.

Strong evidence was found that Chinese children have incorporated the traditional belief in the value of education. Chinese children were concerned about schoolwork and education to a greater degree than were American children. These attitudinal differences might explain the widely reported cross-cultural differences in academic performance.

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Table 1. What Children Thought About on Their Way to School (percent of children)

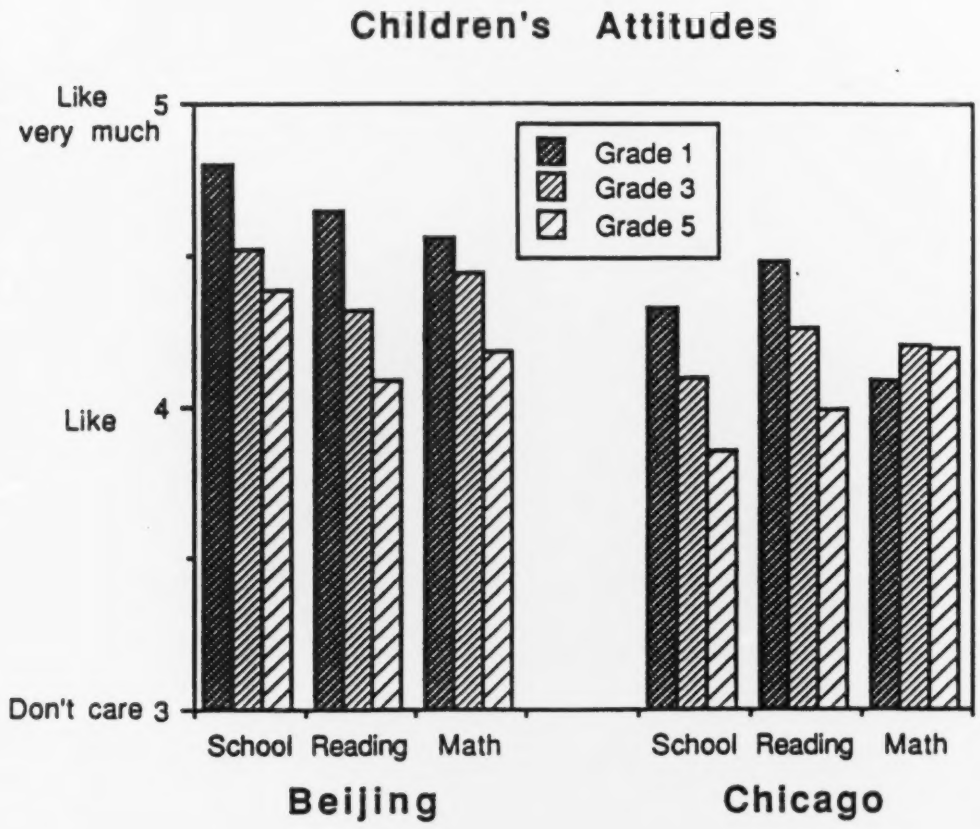
	N	School	Non-school	Nothing
Beijing				
Grade 1	131	81	15	4
Grade 3	125	90	9	2
Grade 5	131	83	15	2
Chicago				
Grade 1	215	46	48	6
Grade 3	233	65	31	4
Grade 5	217	73	24	3

Table 2. Children's Wishes (percent of children)

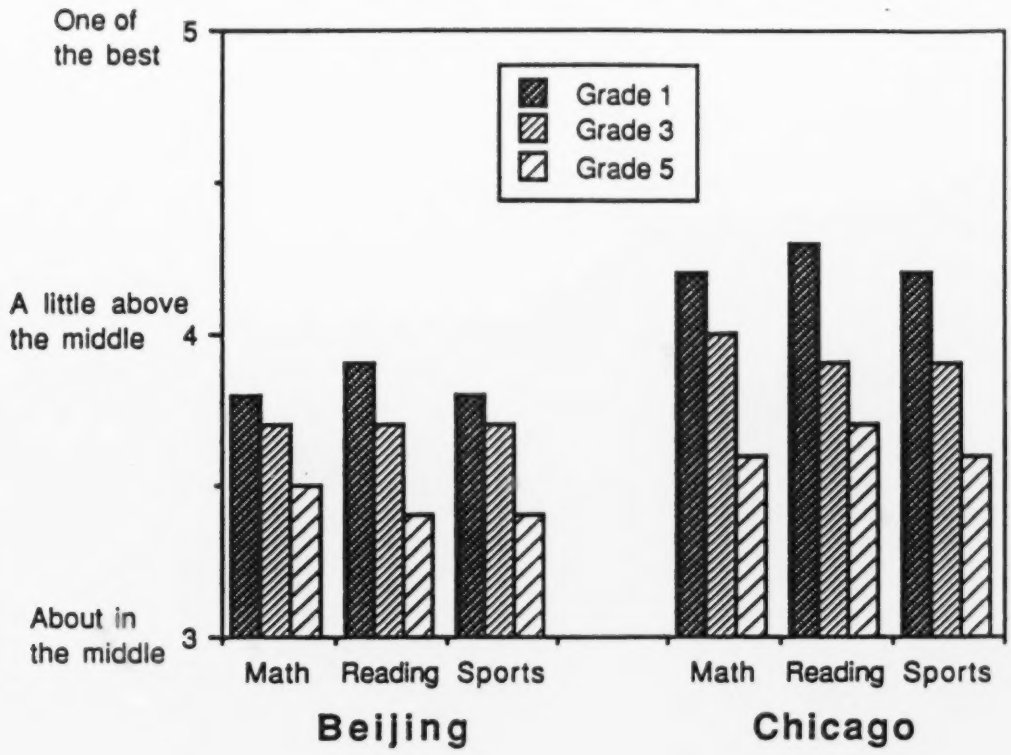
	N	Education	Things	Money	Fantasy	Other
Beijing						
Grade 1	130	65	18	0	1	17
Grade 3	125	70	6	0	8	16
Grade 5	130	73	7	0	4	16
Chicago						
Grade 1	229	4	49	18	10	18
Grade 3	233	9	34	24	15	17
Grade 5	216	13	18	26	20	24

Table 3. Children's Educational Aspirations (percent of children)

	N	High School	Post-secondary	Job	Don't Know	Other
Beijing						
Grade 1	119	40	47	3	1	9
Grade 3	122	53	38	1	0	9
Grade 5	127	42	50	1	0	8
Chicago						
Grade 1	221	32	10	7	21	30
Grade 3	234	62	9	9	5	15
Grade 5	211	73	12	4	3	8


Children's Attitudes
Like very much
5
Like
4
Don't care
3
Grade 1
Grade 3
Grade 5
School
Reading
Math
School
Reading
Math
Beijing
Chicago

Children's Self-evaluations



After-school Activities Besides Doing Homework